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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001323

SIPDIS

NOFORN

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/20/2015

TAGS: [NI](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: IBB FACTOTUM SPECULATES ON A COUP,
PRESIDENT OBASANJO "ACCIDENT"

REF: A. A) LAGOS 706

[B](#). B) ABUJA 1285

Classified By: E.O. 12958 DECL: 07/20/2015; 1.4(A,D)

(S) 1. Summary: Ukandi Damachi (protect throughout), businessman and advisor to former Chief of State and current presidential candidate Ibrahim Babangida told me that President Obasanjo has alienated his natural constituency of ex-military men and risks being overthrown through a military coup or that there might be an "accident" that removes him from the scene before the 2007 elections. I replied that any such action would be unacceptable to the U.S. and the international community. He said that my recent speeches on the rule of law and the critical importance to Nigeria's democracy of the 2007 elections has "riled" the traditional military/business establishment, which is also deeply worried about the possible revocation of their U.S. visas because of our well-founded suspicion of their individual corruption. He also said that Supreme Court Lord Chief Justice Uwais was intimidated successfully by the President in advance of his decision upholding the 2003 elections. See comments beginning para 6.

(C) 2. Damachi had breakfast with me at his request on July 15 in the JO quarters I occupy when I am in Lagos. Damachi, a businessman whose fortune appears to be based on lucrative dredging contracts, has been close to Ibrahim Babangida since the latter became chief of state in 1985. He has been a contact of U.S. ambassadors and the mission since then.

(S) 3. Obasanjo has distanced himself and alienated himself from his natural power base, Damachi argued, by proposing that former military rulers be excluded from political power in Nigeria, by his failure to distribute "equitably" the profits of office to his supporters, and by his alleged desire to manipulate the political system so that he can stay in office after 2007. In addition to Babangida, Damachi identified Danjuma and Malu as leaders of this opposition to Obasanjo. In the aftermath of the Supreme Court's decision upholding the 2003 elections, and Obasanjo's perceived continued efforts through the National Reform Conference to ensure that he can remain in office, Damachi said that it was increasingly likely that the retired generals/businessmen would "unleash the greyhounds", mid-level military officers who could mount a coup.

(S) 4. I reiterated what a disaster a coup against an elected government in Nigeria would be. Even if civil war were avoided, the country would return to pariah status, there would be negative implications for investment, and most international assistance programs would stop. Damachi said that Babangida's circle is aware of these consequences. Therefore, there was also the possibility that Obasanjo would suffer an "accident" or "fatal illness", perhaps similar to the circumstances of former military dictator Abacha's demise. I responded that Obasanjo is duly recognized as the chief of state, and that his achievements are major: ECOWAS, AU, a host of regional issues, now debt relief. Nigeria and Obasanjo are partners of the U.S. Coups and "accidents" are not acceptable options for the U.S. or the international community.

(S) 5. Damachi said that my recent speeches on democracy, the rule of law and the need for successful 2007 elections have been "noticed" and have "riled" at least parts of the military/business establishment. He also said that my statements about reviewing for possible revocation the U.S. visitor visas of those for whom there is a well-founded suspicion of corruption has generated considerable anxiety among the same group. He knew about, and referred to, Ambassador Obiozor's "urgent" meeting with me to discuss a specific visa case. Obiozor had wrongly linked a visa refusal to such anti-corruption efforts. (In this particular case, the visa applicant "forgot" to mention American citizen children.)

(S) 6. Turning to the July 1 Supreme Court ruling upholding

the 2003 elections, Damachi said that the presidency successfully intimidated Chief Justice Uwais to render a favorable decision. The intimidation of Uwais had been so intense, Damachi continued, that the Lord Chief Justice had tried to resign. He had remained in office at the importuning of his northern supporters. Damachi said that Uwais and other judges were vulnerable on grounds of corruption -- and there had been a highly embarrassing press campaign accusing Supreme Court justices of malfeasance unleashed by the presidency.

(S) 7. Comment: Because we see Damachi from time to time, I assume he was freelancing, that our meeting was at his own instigation, not Babangida's. Nevertheless, it is extraordinary to hear a member of Babangida's even outer circle talking about the possibility of a military coup or an "accident", though Damachi has come close before with the Lagos CG (ref A). Therefore, I want to make a record of the conversation. I was at pains about the utter unacceptability to the U.S. and the international community of coups or "accidents". Damachi has known Babangida for a long time: when Babangida was chief of state in the late 1980's, he used Damachi as his link to the Nigerian labor movement and also to the U.S. embassy. But, Damachi has never served as a minister, and has been careful to keep a low official profile. Through all of the twists, turns, coups, counter-coups and elections in Nigeria since the end of the Biafra war, Damachi has never been jailed. Certainly Damachi's comments should not be taken as definitive of Babangida's own thinking. They may, however, reflect what is being said around him.

(S) 8. Comment, continued: the relationship between Obasanjo and Babangida is by no means clear. Ref. B reports Obasanjo's alleged mistrust of National security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed as one of Babangida's men. Nevertheless, they have been associates and coup co-conspirators for much of their careers and have been closely allied at various times to advance their tactical interests. Both, for example, appear opposed (at least for the moment) to Vice President Atiku's presidential aspirations. And, despite Damachi's suspicion, the President continues to state that he will leave office in 2007. Serious enmity between the two would seem more likely if Obasanjo did, indeed, seek to remain in office after 2007 than it is now.

(S) 9. Comment, continued: There continues to be no evidence that I have seen of coup plotting. It is also unclear how much influence retired military officers such as Danjuma or Malu retain over the military forces. It is true, however, that we know relatively little about the "greyhounds" or their ilk, and we do know that the military continues to be starved of funds and characterized by inept management. Nor, if Obasanjo dies suddenly or unexpectedly, should it be presumed that it results from malfeasance. We have reported in various channels that Obasanjo is older than his official age, apparently has diabetes, pursues violent exercise with little sleep, and blacks out from time to time. And, in general, Nigeria's standards of aviation or road safety are notoriously low.

(S) 10. Comment continued: Damachi's comment about possible U.S. visa revocation is evidence that this is an important way we can demonstrate our support for anti-corruption in Nigeria. We are also well-served by our inability to provide the names or numbers of those whose visas have been revoked. It is widely assumed that far more have been revoked than is the reality.

(S) 11. Comment, continued: I cannot comment one way or the other on whether or how Uwais was pressured by the presidency over the 2003 decision. However, it is nearly universally believed that the 2003 elections were deeply flawed, and the Court's decision has little credibility on the street. It is easy to ascribe to intimidation the rationale for the Court's decision.

(S) 12. Concluding comment: I see the significance of this conversation as that talk about coups, largely absent when I arrived in May 2004, has resurfaced. And, unless or until Obasanjo convincingly shows he is going to step down by supporting a successor in 2007, it is no surprise that people around Babangida (and many others) should speculate about possible dire scenarios. My bottom lines: I suspect Damachi's scenarios here reflect speculation -- or wishful thinking. But they are an indicator of the political atmosphere in this country as we move into an electoral season.
CAMPBELL